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VARDUHI BALOYAN

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1. Affiliazione / Authors' information

Institute of Literature after M. Abeghyan of NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia

2. Contatti / Authors' contact

varduhi.baloyan@gmail.com

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From Oral Tradition to App: Armenian Children's Literature in the Digital Age

Varduhi Baloyan*

Institute of Literature after M. Abeghyan of NAS RA (AM)

Email: varduhi.baloyan@gmail.com

Abstract

In an era of rapid digitization, oral and literary traditions are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, reshaping how diverse audiences interact with cultural heritage. This article explores how audiobook and storytelling apps extend the role of folklore in diasporic and multilingual contexts. Using the *Voske Daran* app as a case study, it examines how audio-based literary formats – featuring multilingual content and diverse narrators – enhance emotional and cultural literacy. The study highlights how these tools foster intergenerational connection, hybrid identity formation, and participatory cultural belonging. Transcending linguistic and geographic barriers, *Voske Daran* revitalizes traditional narratives through digital storytelling. The app's design, rich with music, illustration, and regional voices, transforms listening into a multisensory educational experience. This qualitative analysis situates *Voske Daran* within broader trends in digital folklore preservation and emotional learning. Ultimately, the article highlights the pedagogical and cultural power of immersive audio literature in the digital age.

Keywords: digital storytelling, Armenian folklore, audiobook platforms

1. Introduction

This article examines the *Voske Daran* app as a cultural and educational project, highlighting its potential role in fostering social and linguistic inclusion through digital storytelling. In the age of digital transformation, children's engagement with folklore is moving from traditional print formats to immersive multimedia environments (Robin, 2008; Smeda et al., 2014). Research in auditory learning and childhood development shows that voice-based storytelling fosters deep listening, empathy, and emotional regulation, particularly in early learners (Breznitz, 2006; Downey, 2018). Digital storytelling – delivered through narrated audio, music, images, and interactive tools – also supports meaning-making and engagement in young audiences (O'Byrne et al., 2018; Wang & Hoot, 2006). As Rahiem (2021) notes, "Digital storytelling blends the ancient art of storytelling with a range of contemporary tools to weave stories together with the author's narrative voice, including digital images, graphics, music and sound... [It] allows teachers to adopt innovative and improved teaching methods." Especially for preschoolers and early readers, audio-based platforms open access to narrative worlds long before literacy is fully developed (Brody, 2015; Hopkins et al., 2013; Judge et al., 2004).

In this evolving context, multilingual audiobook applications are emerging as rich tools for transmitting cultural traditions. International projects such as GivingTales

* Institute of Literature after M. Abeghyan of NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia.

– which presents Hans Christian Andersen's stories read by renowned actors like Sir Roger Moore and Stephen Fry – demonstrate the appeal and educational potential of such platforms when combined with multilingual subtitles and high-quality production (Dredge, 2015). Similar efforts, such as *Unreal Irish Folklore* and *Celtic Legends for Kids*, revitalize Irish narratives through audio media targeted at families and young listeners, exploring Irish history, folklore, and cultural traditions. Through each series, it delves into the origins and evolution of Ireland's most iconic myths and folk tales, shedding new light on stories and historical episodes that have faded from popular memory over the centuries. These instances illustrate a larger pattern: culturally tailored digital storytelling programs are being utilized more frequently to promote identity formation, emotional intelligence, and cultural continuity.

Within this global media landscape, *Voske Daran* emerges as a distinct initiative dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of Armenian children's literature through audio-digital means. Developed by the Hovhannes Toumanian Museum in collaboration with diasporan and local organizations, the app offers a multilingual collection of Toumanian's works, launching with 22 tales, poems, quatrains, and legends. By providing content in Eastern and Western Armenian, as well as in Russian, Italian, French, Japanese, Arabic, and English, the *Voske Daran* app seeks to transcend the limitations of print media and linguistic proficiency. This multilingual and auditory format enables broader access to Armenian cultural and folk heritage, particularly among young audiences who may not be fluent readers of Armenian but can engage through listening. The app thus fosters a more inclusive and emotionally resonant connection with Armenian storytelling traditions across diverse linguistic backgrounds. Additional language versions are planned, further expanding the app's accessibility and cultural reach. Versions in regional Armenian dialects – such as the Artsakh dialect¹ – are also planned, further enhancing the app's inclusivity and its role in preserving the linguistic diversity of Armenian cultural heritage. It honors a unique regional voice within the broader Armenian linguistic mosaic and affirms the cultural identity of a community that has recently endured immense trauma and dislocation². Artsakh³ has been an integral part of Armenian civilization since prehistoric times, and its linguistic and cultural voice is inseparable from the Armenian historical narrative. In a globalized digital landscape where dominant narratives often overshadow smaller or embattled cultures, platforms like *Voske Daran* may ensure that Armenian voices are heard, identities are preserved, and the full spectrum of Armenian life – past, present, and future – is transmitted through accessible, creative, and effective means.

Much of the modern Armenian diaspora was shaped in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923), when survivors were forced to rebuild their lives across continents. As historian Randall Hansen notes (2004), Armenian communities worldwide have developed in distinct ways, shaped by the cultural landscapes,

¹ Hewitt highlights that the Karabakh [Artsakh] dialect is a notably archaic form of Eastern Armenian, preserving phonological and morphological features that suggest a long, uninterrupted linguistic tradition in the region dating back to medieval times.

² The 2020 Azerbaijani-Turkish military aggression against Artsakh resulted in the displacement of thousands and the loss of access to heritage sites of inestimable value. Among them is Amaras Monastery, now under Azerbaijani control, widely recognized as the site where Mesrop Mashtots, inventor of the Armenian alphabet, founded the first Armenian school in the early 5th century.

³ Strabo (c. 1 AD) identifies Orchistene—widely accepted as ancient Artsakh—as one of the “valleys of Armenia” (Geographica XI.14.4), alongside Araksene and Sakasene. Pliny the Elder (1st century AD) notes that the Kura (Cyrus) River marked the eastern border of Armenia, beyond which lived the Albani people—thus placing Artsakh firmly within ancient Armenian territory (Natural History VI.28–29; VI.39).

challenges, and opportunities of their host countries. These globally dispersed communities, united by a shared heritage, often face the challenge of maintaining cultural cohesion and identity across generations. While the Republic of Armenia today stands as an independent nation and the historic heart of Armenian civilization – one of the world's oldest surviving cultures – millions of Armenians continue to live abroad. For many, especially younger generations, cultural transmission relies heavily on family memory, diaspora institutions, and increasingly, digital platforms. In this context, projects like *Voske Daran* play a vital role in preserving intangible heritage by making Armenian folktales accessible across languages, borders, and generations. Through narrated stories and culturally rooted design, the app serves as a meaningful bridge for diaspora children seeking emotional and linguistic reconnection with their Armenian roots.

Designed for audiences across ages and linguistic backgrounds, *Voske Daran* enables children to engage emotionally and linguistically with their heritage through listening, even if they are not fluent in Armenian. The app offers more than a digital story archive: it transforms storytelling into a multisensory, emotionally integrative experience rooted in algorithmic accessibility, familial intimacy, and heritage preservation. Through its community-based production and effective design, the app serves as a digital infrastructure of memory and identity. Situating Armenian children's literature within the growing international field of digital folklore preservation, *Voske Daran* exemplifies how culturally grounded platforms can nurture hybrid identities within diasporic and globalized contexts.

From a methodological perspective, this article draws on an empirical corpus consisting of the *Voske Daran* app's content (including audio tales, language options, and interface features), associated institutional materials (such as press releases and app store metadata), and publicly available paratexts (including app reviews and partner mentions). The analysis employs interpretive qualitative methods, prioritizing close, descriptive engagement with the app's content and cultural positioning rather than quantitative user metrics.

2. Hovhannes Toumanian's Global and Comparative Relevance

Over the past two decades, the emergence of digital storytelling platforms has significantly transformed the way young audiences experience literature and folklore. Studies in educational psychology and digital media have consistently shown that audio-enhanced storytelling improves children's emotional intelligence, moral comprehension, and cultural awareness (Smeda et al., 2014). Digital environments make heritage more accessible to children regardless of reading ability, language fluency, or physical access to books, thereby enabling broader participation in the preservation and transformation of cultural narratives (O'Byrne et al., 2018; Robin, 2008).

This shift is particularly impactful for diasporic and multilingual communities. Audiobook platforms such as *GivingTales* (UK), *Celtic Legends Audio Library* (Ireland), and *Fiabe Italiane Digitali* (Italy) have adapted traditional folktales into engaging audio formats. These tools function not only as technological mediators but also as what Thompson (2018) describes as emotional infrastructures, or spaces that support the formation of cultural memory and digital identity in younger generations (Ryan, 2015).

In this evolving media ecosystem, Armenian folklore finds meaningful parallels. Rich in allegory, humor, and moral reflection, Armenian folk tales have long

contributed to the global corpus of narrative traditions. Scholars of comparative folklore such as Thompson (1977) and Dundes (1997) have identified numerous Armenian tale types that resonate with international narrative structures – featuring themes such as trickster figures, accidental heroism, and poetic justice. These tales, while deeply rooted in Armenian culture and history, reflect universal experiences, making them both locally grounded and globally intelligible.

The storytelling legacy of Hovhannes Toumanian epitomizes this duality. His works – such as *Քաջ Նազար* (*Nazar the Brave*), *Մոտոտաւնիկ* (*The Liar*), *Անբասն Հուրի* (*Lazy Huri*), *Չախչախ թագաւորը* *King Chakhchakh*, and *Կոնաստ աղջիկը* (*The Girl Without Hands*) – occupy a central place in Armenian children's literature while sharing structural affinities with global folktales, as cataloged in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) classification system.

Nazar the Brave, a sharp satire of false heroism, corresponds to ATU 1640 and shares thematic elements with the Russian *Ivan the Fool*, the Chechen *Neznai*, the Avar *Giant Naznai*, and the Brothers Grimm's *The Brave Little Tailor*. Toumanian's personal archive contains notes and drafts comparing over 30 Armenian and international versions, showing his meticulous study of the folk tradition as a means to refine both character and structure.

Similarly, *King Chakhchakh*⁴ (ATU 545) examines the rise of unworthy figures to fame and power, echoing similar archetypes found in Armenian (*The Fox and the Shepherd*), Chechen (*Old Salt and Bread Are Not Forgotten*), Tatar, Imeretian, Russian (*Bukhtan Bukhtanovich*), and French (*Puss in Boots*) variants. Toumanian worked primarily with oral narratives recorded from the Van-Vaspurakan region⁵, culminating in a tale that ends with a seven-day wedding celebration – a motif consistent with traditional Armenian endings (Navasardiants, 1890, 42-43).

Other notable examples include:

- *The Master and the Servant* (ATU 1000, 7 Armenian versions), related to the Russian tale *As It Hits, So It Responds*
- *The Talking Fish* (ATU 505, 22 versions), rooted in diverse Armenian ethnographic regions
- *The Girl Without Arms* (ATU 706)
- *Lazy Houri* (ATU 501, “Three Old Spinning Women”)
- *The Foolish Man* (ATU 460A, 7 versions)
- *The Wise and the Foolish* (ATU 1643, 10 versions)

The presence of these Armenian folktales on the *Voske Daran* platform contributes to a larger, globally dialogic process in which folklore traditions are not only preserved but placed in conversation with one another. Rather than elevating one tradition above another, the platform highlights storytelling as a cross-cultural dialogue – where motifs, emotions, and archetypes travel across generations, languages, and borders.

In doing so, *Voske Daran* affirms the idea that children's literature – particularly when enhanced by digital tools – can cultivate shared humanity while honoring cultural specificity. The app thus becomes not just a repository of national heritage,

⁴ First published in 1907, Hasker, n. 5-6, pp. 199-204, «Հրիւսթ»: “Tales.”

⁵ Van-Vaspurakan refers to the historical Armenian province of Vaspurakan, with Van as its political and cultural center. In Armenian folklore studies, the term designates a rich corpus of oral tales collected from both the city of Van and surrounding villages across the province. See: T. Navasardiants, *Hay zhoghovrdakan heqiatner* [Armenian Folk Tales], vols. I-III, Tiflis, 1882-1890; also: A. Ghazinyan, ed., *Armenian Folktales from Vaspurakan*, Yerevan: NAS RA Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, 2009.

but a vibrant space of emotional learning, identity-building, and international cultural participation.

3. Emotional and Digital Identity Formation Through Multisensory Cultural Immersion

Digital storytelling's auditory dimension plays a crucial role in how children emotionally connect to literature and construct cultural sense of self. In platforms like *Voske Daran*, voice serves as a powerful carrier of memory, identity, and emotion. Hearing stories in familiar heritage dialects or through carefully dramatized performances helps children form bonds not only with the narrative but also with the speaker and cultural context. As sound studies scholar Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015) explains, voice functions as a "sounding identity," bridging geographical and generational distances.

Voske Daran leverages this by featuring notable Armenian performers, community members, and children reading tales in multiple dialects and languages, which does more than provide linguistic access – it fosters cultural belonging. Armenian children, whether in Yerevan, Marseille, Tehran, or Los Angeles, experience shared history and belonging to cultural memory through recognizable accents and intonations. Even non-Armenian speakers can appreciate the rhythm and musicality intrinsic to Armenian oral traditions. The accompanying culturally resonant music and visuals enhance this immersive emotional space, making literature an experience to be felt, not just consumed, which aligns with Jerome Bruner's (1990) concept of "narrative modes of knowing," where identity is shaped through lived and imagined experiences.

Emotional literacy – the ability to recognize, understand, and express emotions – is enhanced by such storytelling. Children exposed to emotionally rich narratives develop greater empathy, social understanding, and cultural tolerance (Aram & Aviram, 2009; Nikolajeva, 2013).

In this context, *Voske Daran* serves as a cultural immersion environment, offering a participatory framework for young users to experience and emotionally invest in Armenian literary traditions. Moving beyond conventional literacy, which emphasizes text comprehension, the app facilitates identity-building through aural, visual, and impactful pathways. Engaging with emotionally textured performances – often narrated by well-known actors, elders, or regional speakers – children internalize not only plot and character but also intonation, moral cadence, and cultural rhythm. These embodied listening experiences foster participatory culture, where meaning-making is social and identity-reinforcing (Jenkins, 2006).

Voske Daran integrates audio narration with curated musical accompaniment and optimized mobile usability, creating an immersive listening experience on handheld devices that goes beyond what a simple website could deliver. Unlike a static site, the application functions offline once downloaded, with age-appropriate interfaces and audio playback suited to young listeners. It also formalizes the collection of Toumanian's tales in a coherent educational category, rather than dispersing them across varied web pages, potentially making it more engaging for children and caregivers on mobile devices.

The app supports cultural belonging by immersing users in Armenian values, archetypes, language variants, and aesthetic styles. *Voske Daran* offers affirming narratives that serve as what Sims Bishop (1990) describes as "mirrors," reflecting their place within a meaningful cultural lineage. For example, the tale of *Quig*

Նուզար (Nazar the Brave) – a humorous critique of false heroism – becomes a cultural touchstone that children can invoke in social and digital spaces.

This cultural immersion also enables guided participation, where cultural knowledge is co-constructed socially, especially through family engagement (Rogoff, 2003). Listening with parents or grandparents fosters intergenerational dialogue and memory practices that bridge ancestral and digital worlds, an essential experience for diasporic youth. Available app-marketplace data indicates that *Voske Daran* is positively received within its niche: the Google Play Store reports over 1,000 downloads and an average rating of about five stars from roughly 60 reviewers, while Apple's App Store listings likewise show favorable user feedback, including 14 ratings with a 5.0 average in one regional store (Apple App Store; Google Play Store). Together, these indicators point to strong early engagement among active users, even though formal reception studies have not yet been conducted.

The app is freely distributed via the Apple App Store in the Education category, a channel that facilitates access for families and educators. Its listing highlights child-friendly design (age 4+) and English-language support, extending its potential reach within diasporic contexts beyond Armenian-speaking audiences. In addition, available press materials and partner mentions indicate that dissemination relies largely on cultural institutions and community networks, including diaspora youth organizations involved in translation and voice-over work, rather than on mainstream commercial marketing.

By offering access to both audio and textual versions of stories in various languages, the app invites children as well as adult users, into an immersive experience of Toumanian's poems, quatrains, Armenian folklore, ethics, and aesthetics. Although the platform does not yet allow for personalized storytelling or visual expression, it lays the groundwork for future possibilities where digital storytelling platforms might enable children to become co-authors of cultural stories. In such contexts, features like story retellings, avatar creation, or symbolic profile design could serve as semiotic tools for identity formation and cultural participation. These speculative features align with Gee's (2003) concept of affinity spaces – environments where learning and identity evolve through shared interests and cultural resources. Even in its current form, *Voske Daran* contributes to a multisensory atmosphere of cultural intimacy through its use of music, dialects, and illustrative design.

If users are encouraged to create original stories based on traditional tales, their storytelling extends the cultural archive, blending tradition and innovation in ongoing dialogue. Digital identity thus emerges as a living archive of cultural participation.

Voske Daran serves as an educational platform where digital literacy and cultural responsibility intersect. Navigating the app's content and social features helps users develop critical competencies in digital communication while learning respectful cultural representation. In a media environment rife with stereotypes and misinformation, the app's culturally accurate and aesthetically rich content models ethical storytelling, helping users distinguish respectful heritage portrayal from reductive clichés (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010).

Privacy and moderation tools teach data sensitivity and cultural consent – skills vital for navigating digital visibility. This educational dimension contributes to digital citizenship, raising awareness of one's roles and responsibilities in online cultural communities.

Crucially, similar apps have the potential to build community across borders. Social features such as forums or comment sections can transform modern apps into a transnational gathering space where Armenian youth – from Yerevan to Paris, Los Angeles to Rome – listen, compare interpretations, and co-create meanings. This aligns with Appadurai’s (1996) concept of “global ethnoscapes”: imagined communities connected through mediated cultural forms.

Such digital spaces foster diasporic solidarity – a community united by cultural touchstones rather than geography. The coexistence of Western Armenian, Eastern Armenian, and other languages within the app celebrates internal Armenian diversity, turning linguistic variation into an asset rather than a barrier. Cultural exchange occurs intergenerationally, with elder voices guiding younger ones, and interpersonally through user interactions.

These exchanges cultivate heritage knowledge and global cultural citizenship, helping young users see their identities as part of a broader human mosaic where distinct traditions coexist and are respected. In an era of cultural erasure and media homogenization, *Voske Daran* resists by valorizing local knowledge and emotional nuance, preserving a rich, multifaceted Armenian cultural landscape in the digital age.

4. Conclusion

Digital storytelling platforms are reshaping how children and young audiences engage with national literary heritage, especially within diasporic and multilingual contexts. By combining auditory, visual, and interactive elements, these technologies enable deeper emotional and cultural connections that transcend traditional print literacy. They support inclusive spaces where cultural heritage is not only preserved but also actively reinterpreted and shared, helping users form hybrid identities in a globalized world. Platforms like *Voske Daran* exemplify how digital literature can promote digital literacy alongside cultural responsibility, encouraging ethical representation and community-building across borders. Ultimately, such initiatives are powerful tools for sustaining intangible heritage, nurturing intergenerational ties, and supporting the evolving narratives of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity in the twenty-first century.

While the app’s design makes Armenian folklore more accessible in digital form, it also faces challenges common to mobile educational tools: uneven digital access across the diaspora, especially in communities or households with limited smartphone usage; limited quantitative feedback data to evaluate actual reach and impact; and the risk that presenting a specific corpus of national narratives (i.e., Toumanian’s tales) could inadvertently reinforce a particular literary canon rather than a broader diversity of Armenian storytelling traditions.

Given the profound historical disruptions Armenians have endured – from the Genocide of 1915 to the recent forced displacement and cultural erasure in Artsakh – Armenian identity today exists not within a singular geography, but across a fractured and globally dispersed cultural landscape. The result is a diaspora whose size now exceeds that of the population within the modern Republic of Armenia, with individuals bearing varying degrees of linguistic, historical, and emotional proximity to their heritage. In such a context, applications like *Voske Daran* must operate not only as repositories of folklore and literature, but as metaphorical and literal translators – tools that can bridge internal distances within a people historically fragmented by exile, occupation, and violence. It is vital to acknowledge

that cultural reconnection and preservation are acts of resilience against ongoing geopolitical and informational forces that often obscure or diminish Armenian historical narratives. As such, digital storytelling becomes not just an educational or cultural enterprise, but an ethical one – an invitation to explore a literary and cultural tradition that continues to offer insights of enduring relevance across cultural and historical contexts.

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